Civility
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It was during one of the particularly harsh skirmishes in the decades long conflict over sexual orientation in the PCUSA. An attorney friend of mine who was staying abreast of the fight, reading everything he could, even attending and monitoring meetings said to me, "You Presbyterians should learn to be like lawyers. We have figured out how to argue strongly and at the end of the day go for a drink together. It feels like you Presbyterians are fighting for keeps."

I have thought about what he said for a long time. What is it about our differences, our internal conflicts, that makes it difficult, seemingly impossible, to maintain basic, human relationships? What is it about our differences and conflicts that seems so essential, so fundamental, that we are quite willing to sacrifice the unity of the church for them? I have pondered this for decades. I ponder it still – a lot. And so when I was invited to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to spend a few days with some of my fellow Presbyterians, I was immediately intrigued. The icing on the cake for me was that I was to do this in collaboration with Rich Mouw, distinguished scholar, seminary president, Presbyterian Ruling Elder, faithful churchman who I have long admired – mostly from a distance. At the outset I want to make clear my deep conviction that if everyone in the Presbyterian family were like Rich Mouw it would be a very good thing. We might conserve a lot of institutional energy and reinvest in the mission of the church, (which, parenthetically, is one of the tragic casualties as a result of our incessant conflict). Before I really knew Rich he did a very remarkable thing. I served as Moderator of the 208th General Assembly in 1996-97. When I started to talk to people around the church about running/standing for Moderator, it was clear that there was big trouble brewing. The issue of the ordination of gay/lesbian Presbyterians had been fermenting for years and it was clear that opponents were preparing to bring the issue to the Assembly in a final way. Wherever I went, it was what people wanted to know: was I for it, or against it? Feelings ran deeply. I found myself accosted on both sides: by brothers and sisters who wanted me to side with them by declaring clearly that I did not want the Assembly to approve ordination. And I was accosted by brothers and sisters, many of whom I knew well from earlier efforts to advocate for human rights, to side with their appeal to open the doors as widely as possible to gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. I am in that camp. There is no secret about that. But I did hope that we could talk about the issue and find a resolution that did not drive one group or the other out of the church. Martin Marty once characterized church conflict as 10% on

the left and 10% on the right lobbing grenades to one another, over the heads of the 80% in the middle. As much as I admire and respect Marty, I discovered – experienced – a flaw in the paradigm. Sometimes the grenades fall into the middle, sometimes both sides decide to fire at the middle.

The election pitted three of us – who became good friends through the process – one to my left and one to my right. It was a split decision. I tried to be clear that while I personally approved of the effort to remove any barriers to ordination based on sexual orientation, I also respected the wisdom and faithfulness of Presbyteries and Sessions to make appropriate decisions in the matter. The Assembly that elected me did not agree and voted what we know as Amendment B to the Constitution. For the next year I traveled throughout the Church and everywhere met angry people and heard broken people – people red-faced with rage at my position: and heartbroken parents and grandparents who could not believe what the church had just said about their children and grandchildren.

It was a wonderful year, the honor of my life and gave me deep hope for the church. But it also was occasionally a little rough. I was shadowed by representatives of the Presbyterian Lay Committee who took notes and reported on what I had said or not said to their newspaper's editors. On one occasion they hijacked a Q&A session and proudly showed me the tape recorder that had, the gentleman said, "The Goods on you now." A particularly critical article appeared in the Layman along with the most unflattering photograph you could imagine. I know I'm not Robert Redford – but, in the photograph I looked like a blowfish.

I met with advocacy groups on the other side and on one miserable evening was hammered for two hours for not being more forceful and forthright in promoting their agenda.

And in the midst of all that came an invitation from Fuller Seminary to visit, speak to the student body and meet with the faculty. It was late in my term. I was tired and sick of the whole thing. I couldn't imagine that a visit to Fuller wouldn't mean more of the same, maybe worse. So, I flew to Pasadena in fear and trembling. The most amazing thing happened. I was welcome warmly, it felt like unconditionally, from the student who met me at the airport, to the Presbyterian students I had coffee with, to the congregation in the Chapel, to the faculty at lunch, to the President himself, Richard Mouw. I don't recall the subject of the conflict tearing at the seams of the church ever came up. I think we talked about, of all things, theology and education and mission. I came away not only with a sense of relief, but deep admiration and respect for the man whose winsome, generous spirit was reflected in his institution's hospitality. I knew that he and I had some differences and disagreements. But that didn't seem to matter. I have been a Rich Mouw fan ever since and my admiration and respect for him have

deepened over the years. He defines civility for me. He is, I submit, the quintessential Civil Christian.

I encountered incivility in my life and work as the pastor of a congregation, probably no more than all of you, mostly around the issues that get Presbyterians steamed up: ordination and homosexuality, abortion – reproductive rights but also social and political issues that sometimes occur to the preacher to impinge on, overlap, Christian values: gun control, tax policies, immigration, education. I have been told that I'm not only dead wrong but an enemy of God, a Judas betrayer of Jesus – but probably no more than most of you. And I have experienced those occasions, no more than you, when individual church members felt called upon to comment on and critique my personal life – my salary – on one memorable occasion early in my ministry – why my wife wanted a dryer in the manse.

Christians can be uncivil. And you have to wonder if it has anything to do with the level of civility, incivility in the society at large.

In the introduction to his book, *Say Please, Say Thank You: The Respect We Owe One Another*, Don McCullough cites a USA Today article, "it is impossible to ignore the growing rudeness, even harshness of American life." An overwhelming majority of Americans, according to a US News & World Report, think incivility is a serious problem.

Road Rage…people get into shouting matches and sometimes fist fights because the driver in the car next to them won't get out of their way. It happened to me. Sitting at a stop light on Michigan Avenue, in the far left lane and needing to get all the way over to the right lane at the next light in order to make a right turn, I did the logical thing: I put the accelerator down and crossed two lanes and just managed to make it, in front of a BMW. She pulled up beside me. I looked over sheepishly – she rolled the window down, gave me the universal raised middle finger salute and shouted "F you, buddy." I confess that my immediate instinct was to return the compliment. Only the voice of my wife, so gracious and reasonable caught me up short…"You better not – she's probably a member of your church."

Every now and then I remind myself that I was 30 before I ever heard the F word said out loud in mixed company. The "F bomb." Everybody is saying it, all the time.

McCullough says, "Simply put, the neglect of courtesy leads to the collapse of community. The heart of courtesy is respect for persons: it has less to do with manners than with a manner of relating, a manner that acknowledges the worth of human beings." (P4)…"People deserve to be treated with respect, not because they have earned it, not because they are kind and always easy to get along with, but because they are part of something larger than themselves." (p5)

James Calvin Davis, Professor of Religion at Middlebury College, goes deeper in a good little book, *In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues that Divide Us*. In the introduction to his thoughtful book he observes: “Public debate over ‘moral values; has dissolved into a culture war between two extremes: spokespersons for the Religious Right who assume they have a monopoly on moral priorities, and liberal secularists who dismiss the entire debate as an inappropriate invasion of private religion into the realm of politics.”

Davis is helpful in observing that the Right frequently casts the issue – whatever the topic is – in terms of values vs. no values, in the process infuriating the others who think they have come to their conclusions on the basis of equally valid values. Nothing gets to me quicker than the inference that their conclusions on stem-cell research, for instance, or abortion are based on Biblical values while mine are based on nothing more substantial than personal preference and choice.

Falwell, Robertson and Dobson were successful in convincing a lot of people that their positions were Biblical, while those who disagreed were not only not Biblical, but worse.

There are values other than conservative Christian values - to be respected and taken seriously. And the reverse, and this is sometimes very difficult for people on my side of the aisle to acknowledge – there are conservative Christian values that are to be respected and taken seriously.

Could we not call a moratorium on the dreadful practice of disparaging the views and opinions and convictions of the other – not to mention disparaging the other himself/herself?

The saddest thing I can think of is how in the rough and raw arena of politics – that John Kerry’s distinguished military record was turned into a liability: that there is even a name now for discrediting a person’s position by disparaging him or her – “swift boating.”

Could we not, particularly in the church at least imitate football players who after 60 minutes of hand to hand combat, shake hands, sometimes embrace and, of all things, kneel down and pray together.

Davis, later in the book, takes a stab at defining civility. Civility, he says, is “the exercise of patience, integrity, humility, and mutual respect in civil conversation, even (or especially) with those with whom we disagree.” (P 159)

The fundamental requirement is to “hear our neighbor’s position in his or her own terms and familiarize ourselves with the values and viewpoints that inform it.”

The bottom line in all of this is that you and I owe more than civility to one another. As would be followers of Jesus Christ we owe one another something that can only be called agape love.

It is foundational for us: the radical notion with far-reaching implications, social, political, relational, that each of us is a unique creation of God, that we bear with us and carry stamped and sealed in us the very image of God. We are, each of us, creatures of infinite worth and value, not because of anything we have done or not done, but because of the love of the one who created us.

It is our anthropology. It is beneath and behind the historic Reformed commitment to political liberty, the rights and responsibilities of the individual, under, and in, God. It is why, historically, we have insisted that we have obligations to one another: that all of us, together, owe the children, security, and education, an opportunity. Our anthropology – our high view of humankind as God's creation and the bearer of the divine image – is why we build hospitals and clinics and care about health care. it is why we strive for things like "No Child Left Behind," no more bullying, no more shooting.

Our anthropology is why some of us can never give up on the hope for reconciliation – in the world, but particularly in the church.

Theologian-Ethicist James Gustavson speaks of the church as "a community of moral discourse," a community that models civility, respectfulness, forgiveness, reconciliation to a world that desperately needs it.

Are you as haunted, as I am, by some of the last words of Jesus?

"Protect them, holy Father, that they may be one, as we are one." John 17:11

"…that they may all be one so that the world may believe that you have sent me." John 17:20

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." John 13:34

We owe one another in the church basic civility. But we owe one another far more. We are under orders, not to ignore our differences, not to cease seriously talking to one another, discussing, strongly contending with one another. We are not under orders to gloss over our conflicts. God forbid.

We are under orders to love one another and that, it seems to me, means at the very least to be civil – and forgiving, and accepting, and understanding – and loving.

The stakes are high –

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

What the world sees of the church is mostly disgraceful. In my heart of hearts I imagine God’s heart breaks at how God’s people, God’s Church appears.

Was there, is there, ever a more poignant plea than this, written from a prison cell:

“I therefore, a prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you are called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Paul’s thoughts, in prison, had taken wing, had begun to soar. In Christ God has started a new humanity, with a plan to heal divisions, break down walls of hostility, a plan to unite all things. As he sits there in his filthy jail cell, waiting for his execution, he writes, “He is our peace.” In Christ God means to heal, reconcile, mend, bring together, the whole human race – the whole creation.

At the end of your term the retiring Moderator is invited to preach the sermon at the General Assembly’s Sunday morning worship service. After everything that had transpired I decided that the sermon should be Ephesians 4:1-6. “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you are called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the land of peace.”

It was just a few weeks away when I made that visit to Fuller Seminary. I had a few hours of free time, so I found the library and decided to start to work on that sermon. I remembered that Marcus Barth had written one of the best studies of Ephesians. A helpful student behind the desk helped me find the book. I sat down at a table in the reading room of Fuller Seminary and went to work.

Marcus Barth said, “Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit” is much too soft, much too mild. It is hardly possible, Barth said, to render exactly the high sense of urgency in the Greek word: passion full, all out effort, not just spiritual, emotional – but physical, visceral…”Do it. Do it now, Take pains to do it. Do whatever it takes and get it done.”

Civility – Respect – Reconciliation – Love – Unity

I dare to believe that it is God’s hope, God’s intent, for the whole created universe, for the world, for the church, and for you and me.